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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 000617

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SUBJECT: VENEZUELA: A NEW TIME BUILDING SLOWLY

REF: A. CARACAS 00569

[1](#)B. CARACAS 00554

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Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON FOR 1.4 (D)

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) Omar Barboza, Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT) party President and confidant of Zulia Governor and de facto opposition leader Manuel Rosales, reviewed the UNT's organizational plans for PolCouns and PolOffs on March 20. Only three weeks into its transition as a national party (Ref A), UNT leaders are working to build their ranks, form an inclusive platform to unite potential members from across the political spectrum, and devise an alternative, social democratic, proposal to Chavez' increasingly authoritarian "socialism." The party is also seeking international support from potential regional partners. With a recent poll showing a majority of Venezuelan voters do not identify with political parties and have a negative view of Rosales, the UNT has a long slog ahead. However, its leaders pragmatic approach to grassroots party building is the right approach for the party to confront these challenges in the long-term. End Summary.

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Building One Step at a Time  
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[1](#)2. (C) PolCouns, accompanied by PolOffs, met March 20 with Omar Barboza, Gerardo Blyde, and Timoteo Zambrano, the President, Secretary General, and International Relations Secretary, respectively, of former presidential candidate

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Manuel Rosales' Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT) party. UNT leaders set up the meeting at their Caracas party headquarters to brief on the party's development and outreach plans. The Zulia-based UNT launched nationally in early March (Ref A) and, though busy, is clearly in the nascent stage, as indicated by the stacks of unopened boxes at the party seat. Barboza explained that UNT leaders are working simultaneously at the local, national, and international levels to define the party's ideology and platform. At the local level, Barboza said they are forming popular networks similar to those used during Rosales' campaign, organized around the 11,000 voting centers--particularly those in poor

neighborhoods--used in the presidential election. Blyde added they have nearly 600 popular networks in Caracas alone.

Barboza said the Organizing Commission he heads has selected two delegates from Caracas and nearly all of Venezuela's 23 states to establish its national governing structure.

13. (C) UNT leaders are also focused on drafting the party's general principles in preparation for the UNT's ideological conference in September, and to facilitate the integration of the party's disparate political strands into a single entity.

While many UNT founders hail from the former political giant Accion Democratica (AD), Rosales' "big tent" approach to politics has drawn people from across the political spectrum, making a unifying document with an agreed set of principles essential for fostering a party identity. Barboza also pointed out the document's value in recruiting new members, saying that "Chavez comes with money and ideology. We don't have money, but at least we have a message." As UNT is positioning itself as the new social democrat party, much of the material appears to consist of revamped AD theories. Training for youth leaders will begin the weekend of March 24, Blyde said.

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Separating From the Pack  
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14. (C) The three UNT leaders outlined ways in which they are implementing Rosales' presidential campaign and subsequent pledge to present an alternative opposition agenda. For instance, Blyde said the party moved its weekly press conferences to Tuesdays to avoid the trap of always reacting to ruling party statements or initiatives. (Note: Chavez frequently announces new initiatives on his Sunday "Alo, Presidente" television program. Chavista and opposition parties traditionally hold weekly press conferences on Mondays as well.) Each conference will be accompanied by follow-up actions during the week. For example, in one upcoming press conference, former Chavista agriculture minister and current UNT leader Hiram Gaviria will discuss

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current food shortages and give projections for future agricultural production based on government statistics. During the week, UNT will then organize demonstrations nationwide, some in front of state-run markets, to emphasize the theme.

15. (C) They admitted that their ability to set the agenda in some areas would be limited due to the Chavez government's lack of transparency and unwillingness to dialogue with the opposition. Nevertheless, the UNT will do its best to be prepared on some key issues. On constitutional reform, for example, Blyde and Barboza mentioned that the technical working group formed in December continues to work, and will be ready to highlight problems with Chavez' proposal (once it is revealed), and to present counter-proposals. The UNT will also try to raise the political cost of Chavez' constitutional proposal as much as possible by hammering on Chavez' plan to eliminate presidential term limits, capitalizing on polling results that show most voters are opposed to the idea. They also are planning to work with civil society NGOs in some areas, such as education and human rights.

16. (C) Blyde also mentioned that UNT is seeking IRI and NDI leadership training for popular network members that they want to insert into community councils ("consejos comunales"). Not only will this begin to give the UNT a foothold within poorer neighborhoods, he explained, but they hope to also encourage autonomy for the councils, creating resistance to Chavez' attempts to eliminate municipalities. (Note: Community councils are funded directly by the presidency, which reviews all projects before dispensing money. See Ref B.) While the UNT leaders understand Chavez' intention is to use the community councils to accumulate even

more power, they believe they can best disrupt Chavez' plans from inside, rather than by not participating.

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Not Pursuing Recall Referenda  
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¶17. (C) While noting the party has no official position as yet on recall referenda, the UNT leaders said they don't currently plan to pursue recall referenda against Chavista governors and mayors, as they thought it would be counter-productive. Barboza, a former Zulia governor, noted that state constitutions require governors recalled after the mid-point of their term (in this case November 2006) to be substituted by another member of their government (and presumably of the same party), which defeats the purpose of recalling the official. The UNT sees more value in preparing candidates for the 2008 regional elections instead (assuming Chavez doesn't change the constitution to eliminate popular election for governors). Moreover, Blyde added that the legacy of the Tascon List has created a climate of fear that would inhibit many opposition supporters from signing recall petitions.

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Limiting Engagement with Other Opposition Parties  
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¶18. (C) The UNT is not seeking to form a common platform with other opposition parties as previously rumored. Barboza said the UNT stands ready to collaborate with others on an ad-hoc basis when their interests or ideas converge, but it is not pushing a unified coalition. He also added that in cases where they disagree with other parties, the UNT will not publicly criticize or challenge them.

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Casting Nets Internationally  
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¶19. (C) Zambrano and Blyde said their international strategy consists of contrasting Chavez' brand of authoritarian-style leftist ideology with the more democratic one of Brazil, on one hand, and forming links with like-minded parties in the region on the other. The first plan includes distributing news articles and other information to call attention to Chavez' use of the Enabling Law and constitutional changes to undermine democratic and economic institutions. The three leaders noted that the decree laws and Chavez' public bullying of smaller Chavista parties to form a single revolutionary party have helped their cause. Zambrano said their experience at a recent international conference in

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Morocco, suggested presentations on Chavez' work with radical, militarized groups like the Frente de Francisco Miranda could also generate international concern.

¶10. (C) In terms of alliances with other parties, the UNT is pushing the message that the opposition, like Chavez, favors regional integration, but based on mutual interests, not mandatory acceptance of a particular ideology as Chavez promotes. The party would ideally like to seek out prominent regional figures, such as Chile's former President Ricardo Lagos or Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, for support. Zambrano noted that Rosales would likely travel to Brazil next, followed at some point by Chile. Blyde recently traveled to Nicaragua and said he also planned to go to Guatemala soon. Other countries they would like to target are Ecuador, Peru, and Argentina, but they acknowledged that Chavez' strong hold over President Kirchner would complicate outreach to the latter country. Once Rosales has made visits in the region, the UNT would prepare a formal proposal for a high profile U.S. visit. Zambrano added he has roughly thirty people working with him to coordinate UNT's international efforts.

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Comment  
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¶11. (C) The UNT is at the beginning of a long building process with many hurdles ahead. According to a recent Hinterlaces poll, Rosales is viewed positively by only 25 percent of voters and negatively by almost 60 percent, thanks in no small part to bashing by opposition rivals. Moreover, Hinterlaces shows that nearly 70 percent of voters do not identify with any political parties and many poor voters still doubt the opposition's sincerity in reaching out to them. Members' resolve may become an issue for the party in the medium to long term as many of the UNT's most likely supporters tend to be middle-class professionals--some of whom are preparing a "plan B" to leave in case political and economic conditions further deteriorate. Even the UNT headquarters receptionist approached PolOffs as they were departing to ask about the immigrant visa application process.

¶12. (C) Still, the UNT leaders seem to have a pragmatic long-term view of the problems they face and are addressing a critical need--not just for their party, but for all of the opposition--in trying to devise a platform that unites its various members and focuses its supporters. They are also making a serious effort to develop a visible democratic alternative for Venezuelan voters. Their plan to participate in the community councils is a good way to carve out continuously shrinking space for the opposition and expose cracks in the BRV system from the inside, despite the risk of potentially supporting Chavez' attempt to further centralize power.

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